

SOCIAL JUSTICE NIGHT COURT

The Social Justice Night Court has proven to be a great success. Thanks to the tremendous support of judges and individual attorneys who are offering their time and expertise, the citizens of this community are getting free legal counseling and court case filings.

In April of 2003, County Court at Law One Judge Alvino “Ben” Morales, in conjunction with Israel Reyna, director of Texas Rural Legal Aid (TRLA), presented this project to the Board of Judges. A resolution was passed by all of the Judges in Webb County and the project got underway on July 8th, 2003. Judge Morales was present to preside over the first court case filings.

Uncontested divorces are the type of cases that are primarily being flagged for referral to the clinic. Cases involving a name change, an adoption or probating of a will are also prime candidates for referral to the justice clinic.

Legal Aid advocates TRLA, take applications for legal services and make a determination both whether the applicant is financially eligible for legal aid and whether the case involves an uncontested matter that may be handled and disposed of by a pro bono lawyer through the community justice clinic and courthouse. The present pro bono coordinator, Nelly Vielma, lines up the pro bono lawyers and briefs them on how the justice night court system works and is ready to answer any questions and/or address any concerns a lawyer may have about the case to be handled through the justice clinic and courthouse.

The clinic is equipped with 4 laptop computers provided by TRLA. TRLA will prepare the pauper’s affidavit of inability to pay court costs; draft the petition; a waiver of citation; and the final decree or judgment. Two or three legal secretaries are on duty to make the necessary changes to the pleadings and related case documents. The district clerk and county clerk have two or three deputy clerks participate in the clinic for the purpose of handling the filing of cases at the clinic/courthouse. There is also a court reporter, a bailiff, an interpreter and a coordinator, all who participate on a pro bono basis. Notaries public are also on hand to notarize any documents.

The Social Justice Night Court is held on the second Tuesday of each month at 5:30 p.m., at the Justice Center’s Central Jury Room, 1110 Victoria, 2nd Floor, Laredo, Texas.

To find out if you qualify for free representation call 1-800-840-3379, Ext. 21 (Legal Aid), Monday thru Thursday – 8:15 a.m. / 11:30 a.m. or 1-888-988-9996, Monday thru Thursday – 4:00 p.m. / 8:00 p.m. and on Fridays, 4:00 p.m. / 6:00 p.m.

With the continued assistance of individual attorneys and support personnel, the Social Justice Night Court will continue to provide free legal services and night court to low-income residents of Webb County.